October 2005

Digg'n Up Some Dirt:

Archaeologists have record season at Barger Gulch

By Denise I. Adamic

The late summer sun warms our faces and the scent of sagebrush tickles our noses as we explore the rolling hills of the Kremmling Field Office's (KFO) backyard. We glance around at the terra cotta-colored soil to find the ground dusted with flakes of gray, cloudy rock. When we bend down to examine one of these pieces, we find that it has a smooth surface. Upon closer inspection, it seems that the piece has been shaped by someone, but who? The flake we're looking at is an example of Kremmling chert, a quartz-like stone, and chances are that it has been chipped away by a prehistoric Native American here at the Barger Gulch Archaeological site in Middle Park, Colorado.

Nestled within the northern most reaches of the Colorado Rockies, this Bureau of Land Management (BLM) area is made up of three distinct topographic regions: North Park, Middle Park, and the Laramie River Valley. From fossils dating back 62 – 67 million years ago, to Native American buffalo kill sites, tipi rings, and vision quest locations that are over 12,500 years old, the area is a gem of prehistoric, cultural, and paleontological resources. We are in the midst of a BLM world-class heritage area.

A STUDENT ARCHAEOLOGIST USES SCREENS TO SIFT THROUGH EXCAVATED DIRT IN SEARCH OF SMALL ARTIFACTS.

Today's adventure finds us in the midst of an active excavation with members of the University of Wyoming's George Frison Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. This is the group's 15th season in Middle Park, and its 8th season at Barger Gulch.

BLM has supported the ongoing research at this archaeological site with funding from $5,000 to $8,000 annually. The BLM contribution has generated outside grant funding in excess of $300,000 from the University of Wyoming and the George Frison Institute, the Colorado State Historic Fund, and the National Science Foundation.

"This is a truly wonderful partnership for the BLM," said Frank Rupp, Archeologist for the KFO. "It is a shinning example of a long term collaborative commitment to a growing body of research in Folsom and Paleo-Indians in North America. This project has also supported three graduate doctorate degrees, six master's degrees, and numerous undergraduate students."

The archaeology team is hard at work, slowly removing the dirt covering the artifacts.

The Barger Gulch site covers over one square mile. A working hypothesis is that the site was occupied for one to three months during the fall and winter seasons. Radiocarbon dates obtained from this site show living areas that existed 11,500 to 12,800 years ago. (Radiocarbon dating is a scientific process of determining the age of organic material and is used in archaeology, geology, geophysics and other branches of science.)

Archaeologists refer to these Native American people as the Folsom culture. The people who made up this culture were mobile hunters who followed groups of large mammals and left flakes of Kremmling chert that cover the modern ground surface.

Dr. Surovell shows some of the pieces found this summer at Barger Gulch.

Dr.Todd Surovell and Dr. Nicole Waguespack, project directors for the University of Wyoming at the Barger Gulch site, explained that Kremmling chert is ideal for making tools.

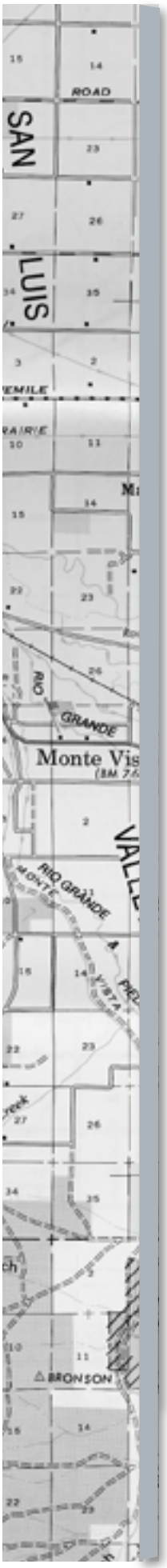
"This material was used by the Folsom people because the rock's characteristics made it easy to control the shape of tools," said Surovell.

This year, 99% of the materials found at Barger Gulch consisted of Kremmling chert. The other 1% consisted of materials from outside this site locality, suggesting that most of the tools used at Barger Gulch were created there too.

The artifacts found at the site included a variety of lithic tools, and were mainly projectile points (spear heads) or scraping and cutting tools. Some tools found at Barger Gulch demonstrate highly skilled craftsmanship, while others are elementary in their design. These differences in skill level have led researchers to hypothesize that the occupants of the site ranged in age as well as ability.

Lauren Hayden, a student archaeologist from Hunter College in New York, carefully scrapes dirt from a piece she uncovered.

"We don't know for sure, but one possible explanation is that there were children here learning flint knapping from their elders," said Rupp.



Interestingly, the excavation has uncovered mostly chert materials, but no structures or burial sites have yet been discovered. This further supports the idea that the people who used this area came here from other places for a short period and then moved on, perhaps following animal herds. The few pieces of identifiable bone that have been found were those of medium to large mammals, such as bison, elk, deer, pronghorn, and bighorn sheep.

This student archaeologist is recording location of a find.

This summer's field session was the most productive one yet for the University of Wyoming crew. Due to a summer of favorable weather conditions, the group enjoyed twice as much digging time this year as they have in previous seasons. This summer the groups' time added up to a total of 40 days in the field stretched over four field sessions. A field session consists of camping out on site and working 10 days straight with 4 days off before coming back and doing it all over again. Work shifts for these archaeologists usually coincide with daylight hours - rising early and working late.

This site has provided more than just clues from the past. Numerous professional journal publications, conference papers, and newspaper articles have been written detailing the information gathered from this area. The project has also opened the world of archeology to the local community and people across the country, both inside and outside of the classroom.

An official finding at Barger Gulch — once a discovery is made it is labeled and photographed.

"Students from throughout the United States, avocational archaeologists from Colorado and Wyoming archaeological societies, as well as tourists and visitors have all been afforded opportunities to see, learn and participate from professional and student archaeologists in-the-field here at Barger Gulch," said Rupp.

The Barger Gulch site has the highest density of artifacts of any known Folsom site. More importantly, Middle Park, Colorado has the highest concentration of Paleo-Indian sites in all of North America. Due to its national importance and the information produced from this research, BLM can grant the area national recognition under the National Historic Preservation Act. This designation provides additional protection for archaeological resources. With the cooperation of private landowners, the BLM and the local community can work together to preserve this piece of Colorado's cultural heritage.

As the sun begins to melt into the horizon, our adventure draws to a close and we're left to wonder who were the people who inhabited these now dry, desolate ravines, during this part of Colorado's history? Why were they here, and did they live as families or as wanderers who happened upon one another at this location?

The questions remain, and slowly the answers will surface. For now, we'll have to wait until next field session to take a road trip to the Barger Gulch archaeological site for more exciting answers to our numerous questions about the area and the people who lived here.